

International Society for Music Education

ISME



**RELEVANCE AND REFORM IN THE EDUCATION OF
PROFESSIONAL MUSICIANS**

**Proceedings of the 20th International Seminar of the
ISME Commission on the Education of the Professional Musician**

Belo Horizonte, Brazil

15-18 July 2014

Editor

Glen Carruthers

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All papers presented at the 2014 ISME CEPROM Seminar in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, were fully (blind) refereed by a panel of international authorities before inclusion in the Seminar Proceedings.

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication

Author: ISME Commission on the Education of the Professional Musician
(20th: 2014: Belo Horizonte, Brazil)

Title: Relevance and Reform in the Education of Professional Musicians. Proceedings of the 20th International Seminar of the Commission on the Education of the Professional Music, Belo Horizonte, Brazil [electronic resource]

ISBN: 978-0-9942055-1-3 (ebook)

Notes: Includes bibliographical references.

Subjects: Music--Congresses.

Music in education--Congresses.

ISME Commission on the Education of the Professional Musician

Dewey Number: 780.7

Our sincere appreciation is expressed to the following people for their support:

Heloisa Feichas

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Mission Statement and Acknowledgements	6
---	----------

Glen Carruthers

Preface

Relevance and reform in the education of professional musicians – An overview.....	7
---	---

I. Identity Formation

Anna Reid & Dawn Bennett

Becoming and being a musician: The role of creativity in students’ learning and identity formation	15
---	----

Kaija Huhtanen

The professional identity of a church musician.....	24
---	----

II. Musicians’ Health and Well-Being

Diane Hughes, Mark Evans, Sarah Keith & Guy Morrow

A “duty of care” and the professional musician/artist.....	31
--	----

III. Instrumental Teaching

Gemma Carey & Catherine Grant

Teachers of instruments, or teachers as instruments? From transfer to transformative approaches to one-to-one pedagogy	42
---	----

Angeliki Triantafyllaki

Musicians as teachers: Calls for a “creative” higher music education.....	54
---	----

IV. Career Preparation and Transition to Career

Amanda Watson & David Forrest

Being a musician: Performance reviews and the orchestral musician..... 62

Diana Tolmie

Identifying, analysing and aligning “the dream” with vocational preparation: An investigation into first-year music undergraduate career aspirations and motivations..... 73

Pamela Pike

Newly minted professional pianists: Realities of teaching, performing, running a business and using technology86

Janis Weller

Making a living in music: Financial stability and sustainability in enacting artistic identity 93

V. Informal and Practice-Based Learning

Ricardo Costa Laudaes Silva

From school to “real world” jazz: Learning improvisation in a community of practice... 102

Fernando Rodrigues

Informal practices in a formal context of musical education: An experience report..... 108

Annie Mitchell

Hip to be square: Where the street meets academe..... 118

VI. Ways of Learning

Eddy Chong

Understanding creative musical problems to renew composition pedagogy..... 130

Juan Pablo Correa Ortega

Using emotional responses for teaching musical analysis: Some outcomes in an undergraduate music programme..... 142

Tania Lisboa, Roger Chaffin & Alexander P. Demos

Recording thoughts: An innovative approach to teaching memorization..... 151

Diana Blom & Matthew Hitchcock

ePortfolios: A technologically-assisted learning platform for the professional musician...163

Dawn Bennett & Diana Blom

The program note as creative knowledge and skills: Shaping a collaborative interpretation of newly composed music.....173

VII. Assessment and Curriculum Renewal

Don Lebler

Promoting professionalism: Developing self-assessment in a popular music program.... 181

Richard S. Niezen

Music school leadership as a transformational learning experience 192

Author Biographies.....203

Informal practices in a formal context of musical education:

An experience report

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Abstract

This research was designed to study the adaptation and applications of informal music learning practices in a context of formal education. The knowledge of musical learning processes in extracurricular contexts has been approached with great interest by researchers, throughout the years. The aim was to explore the link between these processes, its procedures and their interrelationships, to assist the work of teachers and enrich the practice of music in general. The methodological support of Action Research, in conjunction with the use of ethnographic techniques of data collection such as participant observation and questionnaires, allowed gathering students' views about the applied activities. The subject "Musical Informal Practices," offered for four months in the Undergraduate Course at the School of Music of the State University of Minas Gerais, Brazil, served as the base environment for the study. The research involved fourteen students and with the activities developed through them it was possible to apply, study and discuss the main musical practices of informal learning, with reference to the work of Professor Dr. Lucy Green (2008). Thus, at the end of the study, through the reports of the students, we concluded that the informal practices, after due adaptations, act as facilitators for the students' in their musical practices.

Keywords

informal learning, formal contexts, practices.

Introduction

Learning music in Brazil has evolved significantly in recent years. Through new schools, new experiences and new research in this area, we can allege that there is a remarkable recognition of the value of music education in educational training of individuals as a whole.

In Brazil, the interest in research related to informal practices has grown: (Conde & Neves, 1984), (Arroyo, 2000, 2001), (Hentschke & Souza, 2003), (Correa, 2000, 2008), elaborated studies on the valuation of knowledge brought by the students; (Correa, 2000), (Wille, 2003), (Braga, 2005), (Rodrigues, 2004, 2007), (Lacorte & Galvão, 2007), developed research about identifying informal learning practices. (Feichas, 2006), (Grossi, 2009), (Grossi & Lacorte, 2010), (Grossi & Martinez, 2011), (Silva & Grossi, 2011), (Vedana, Soares, & Finck, 2011) elaborated research that involves the inclusion of informal practices as support for Music Education.

The training of future teachers in the Undergraduate Course at the Music School (MS) of the State University of Minas Gerais (UEMG), at Belo Horizonte, Brazil, focuses largely on the diffusion of classical music in their practices. This is possibly due to the curriculum of these courses, which are mostly modeled on western classical music schools.

When the undergraduate student starts his activities as a teacher, in the stage of internship, he is faced with a different reality from that exemplified in his course. According to informal reports from students of the MS, several resources and procedures discussed during the course for the effective teaching of music, normally do not match the musical reality of our public schools.

This research describes the procedures used in adapting the informal techniques of musical learning in a formal education, taking into account the implications involved in this process. The environment for this procedure was the subject “Informal Practices” in the Undergraduate Course in the first half of 2012. Based on Green (2008), the objective aimed to encourage musical practice in an attempt to bring it closer to the reality experienced by the students and school community.

Methods

The development of activities in a school environment where these same activities are not normally practiced was conducted by this researcher. Taking into account the participation of students in these practices, this study is characterized as an action research. According to Thiollent (2009) we can define action research as

a type of social research evidence base that is designed and carried out in close association with an action or solving a collective problem and in which researchers and representative participants of the situation or problem are involved in a cooperative or participatory form (Thiollent, 2009, p. 16).

Rocha, Leal and Boaventura (2008) define as a fundamental characteristic of action research the “possibility of a greater interaction between researcher and representatives of the reality researched, in order to produce change (action) and understanding (research) in the context of the research” (p.73). The authors also state that both the researcher and the participants play an important role in the development of the research through effective actions.

Green (2008, p. 25-27) describes seven possible activities to be performed in the application of informal practices in formal musical education context. The intention here was not to recreate all the steps taken by the professor imagining that this is a different context from that described in her research. This study aimed to analyze the profile of the students and thus apply those activities that were not experienced by them, or at some point were, and try to develop a new understanding for these same activities. Of the seven stages suggested by Green (2008), only the first four stages were developed, which throughout the research were adapted to the student's characteristics and according to the time and the physical structure available at the MS.

Stage 5 suggested by the author was not carried out because all the students in this research were adults and all of them, besides being musical college students, also are working as musicians and/or teachers. In this sense they have experienced group presentations and have had contacts with musicians of various natures.

The 6th and 7th stage were not performed because of the time that these specific activities would require. In this research, for the development of these stages, it would be require a larger number of classes or longer time for each class.

At the end of each activity musical performances were carried out by students with their respective groups. These performances were recorded on video and audio for subsequent data analysis. At the end of the semester a questionnaire was distributed to all participants with a survey to best gather opinions on the activities. In this paper only the responses from the questionnaires are presented.

Music school

The MS offers three courses for music training: Undergraduate in Music with Specialization in Education (L.E.M.); Bachelor in Instrument or Singing (B.A.C.) and Undergraduate in Music with Specialization in Instrument or Singing (L.I.M.).

The purpose of the L.E.M. course is “to form teachers in music education with expertise and proficiency in the music area, to act primarily on basic education in regular schools, kindergarten, elementary and middle levels” (UEMG , 2012, p, 47).

The School provides a framework of rooms with a variety of types and sizes, some of them relying on instruments such as piano, sound equipment, video projectors and blackboard for notes. Moreover, it also offers instruments which may be loaned to students like acoustic guitars, percussion and woodwinds, helping those students who for some reason cannot bring their individual instruments.

Student profiles

Altogether 14 students participated in the exercise, and they all have had musical knowledge, practical and/or theoretical. When asked “How long have you been playing any instruments?” responses ranged from five years to twenty five years of practice and only one student answered that “he has not played any instrument for a while”.

When they were asked, “What instrument or instruments do you play?” reports shown that there is a primary chosen instrument, with which the students have a greater experience and intimacy, and there are other instruments which students admit to knowing how to play. As the main instrument, the acoustic guitar was chosen by eight students, three chose keyboard or piano and singing, and trumpet and flute were individual choices of three other students.

The L.E.M. curriculum offers classes in baroque flute as a musicianship teaching tool and keyboard or guitar classes as a harmonic instrument, expanding the learning opportunities of these students.

All these factors have facilitated somehow the development of the discipline and enforcement of informal practices, for some of the students have mentioned that they had already experienced these practices in learning situations prior to the course, especially guitarists. Regarding age, the exercise had students from 22 to 67 years of age, showing a wide range of values and diversity of experience.

Activities

All the four activities were developed only in the classroom because of the difficulty encountered by the students to gather outside of classes. The duration of each session was 1 hour and 40 minutes, once a week, for 18 weeks or, in other words, one semester. Each

activity lasted on average 4 classes. At the beginning of each activity a task was given to be undertaken. Then the groups gathered and spent some class time hearing the song chosen and adapting it with the available instruments, rehearsing and soon after, the groups would give a presentation.

The activities were proposed with the intention of introducing students to the reality of informal practices to its fullest extent and to present how these practices happen, proposing a simulation as close as possible to a real learning practice experienced as a popular musician at the beginning of their learning process (Green, 2001, 2008). The author highlights the importance of emphasizing in the first four of the five fundamental principles of informal learning practices of popular music, namely:

Learning music that pupils chose for themselves; learning by listening and copying a recording; peer-direct learning without adult guidance, and learning in a holistic, often haphazard way with no planned structure or progression. The fifth principle, involving the integration of listening, performing, improvising and composing, was implicit, particularly with regards to listening and performing, and also to some extent improvising. (Green, 2008, p. 25)

Activity 1 – Green identifies this first stage as “The heart of the project”, in which to experience informal music practices profoundly (Green, 2008. p. 25). This started with the division of the class into groups, where each member of a group brought a song as a suggestion to be “caught by ear”. Students had complete freedom in the groups’ division; the only restriction was that people who had no experience with this activity would have to be separated into groups from those who have had previous experience. This was done so that those students with no practice could experience activities like “catch music by ear” with all its possibilities without an interference from a person “playing” for them.

Once defined, the groups decided the song that they would work on and afterwards it would be presented in class. Interesting to note is the students' account of the emphasis on group work and how the affinity between them or the number of participants can contribute positively or not to the activity development. The comments below illustrate some of the students’ opinions after the conclusion of each activity.

Student 5 (S5): This activity provides students the opportunity to practice their perception and performance.

(S7): Teamwork is always positive. Students support each other and doubts are clarified more easily.

(S8): I thought it was great, because when the student plays what he likes [he is part apt to learn more].

Activity 2 - In this activity, students were asked to bring a new piece that had in its structure only one riff which is easily recognized. In class a few examples of riffs were shown with national and international music, highlighting where and how they may appear. Students were allowed to remain in the same groups or make a new division among colleagues. The goal here was not to seek and write an exact definition for the term riff, but to understand its meaning as a small motif or musical phrase that is repeated throughout the song, and to understand this feature can be a facilitator for the musical practice.

(S3): This practice was even more interesting. It was difficult to define, but the riff can help a lot with the practice of teaching instrument[s].

(S5): In this case the work is directed to maintain the riff, which must be played as closely as possible to the original, but the creation, in my view, was compromised.

(S8): Very good, because it worked our ears.

(S12): In this activity, the idea of the riff was very good and it was clear to us what was a riff. Playing it on the guitar was harder for me, but the group was small, so we fought our fears and the activity happened. I loved it!

Activity 3 - At this stage, Green suggests the repetition of activity one with the intention to “give the pupils a chance to build on the skills they already acquired, and to observe to what extent this was realized” (Green, 2008, p.26). For this research, this procedure seemed unfeasible because several students had already performed in their musical or instrumental learning activities with some informal music practices. In this sense the suggestion was that students would choose another song that in its structure had more than one riff, which would be presented by the same instrument or by a different instrument. From this recognition the goal was to identify the “voices” or the separate layers, adapting them to the instruments available at the school and then play the music in the classroom. This procedure relates to Stage 2 suggested by Green (2008), which in this exercise was divided between two activities, 2 and 3, in order to strengthen the identification and reproduction of a riff.

(S1): It is an exercise that must be applied by every teacher, because it develops a more analytical listening of the sound mass present in a recording.

(S7): In this activity students have the opportunity to practice listening to the instruments separately. The experience of playing the instruments present in the music is a unique opportunity for the student.

(S9): This was very good to do, because I felt more comfortable when I was able to use my voice replacing an instrument.

Activity 4 - Compose a song without a predefined style, using aspects learned in previous activities. Compose, rehearse and then present in class. As in previous activities, students had the freedom to choose the groups.

(S1): I found it extremely positive. After the composition, we could insert voices as bass lines, rhythmic ostinatos, riffs, etc.

(S4): The coolest part was of the composition and we tried to use the other activities to our advantage.

(S7): Great exercise. Allows students to work the creativity and the experience with arrangements as well as the opportunity to get to know the musical side of each student.

Conclusion

With the brief statements described by the research, we conclude that the application of informal practices is feasible as a stimulus to musical practice. Following the example of Green (2008) it was necessary to adapt it to the specific group, in this case the students of the MS at UEMG.

The sequence of activities had minor changes in the overall context, which did not modify in a decisive way the initial concept relating to the informal music practices as incentives of musical practice. It is necessary to point out that the activities were adapted without losing the emphasis required in the first five stages of informal learning practices of popular music described by Green (2008, p.25).

Some students demonstrated they already had certain proficiency with informal practices, which did not disqualify the activities because those were presented with a variant form of how to observe and appreciate these practices. Their presence somehow enriched the activities, while they served as models for those colleagues who had little or no contact with the activities proposed.

Some points that were highlighted by the students as positive aspects concerning the activities were: the exchange of experiences, mutual aid, practice of perception and performance, teamwork, the opportunity to play what you enjoy among others.

The fact that all the participants were adults with previous musical experiences and students in a Music College did not undermine the development of the activities. Students realized that informal practices can greatly be used as a positive aggregate approach to encourage musical practice.

We can conclude from the reports that there was a gain in the musical experience for the students through the adaptation and implementation of informal practices according to Green's (2008) example.

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